

"MORE LIGHT BREAKING FORTH"

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My grandparents were faithful stalwarts in their tidy white clapboard church perched on a corner of somebody's farm field. Grandpa was Treasurer and grandma played piano. As I sat with grandma in worship, she whispered her own prayers during the pastoral prayer.

One day I heard her gasp a prayer while toiling in her kitchen. No small thing, her gasps were important clues in the forming of my faith. Of grandma's six children, her Donna was her most difficult. But eventually, despite everything, a tall, gentle, hearing-impaired man named Bob fell in love with my Aunt Donna. He was constant and patient, adoring and forgiving. With Bob, Donna became her best person. One problem: Bob was Roman Catholic. Our family whispered about it. Frankly, this truth wreaked havoc with grandma's strong faith where Catholics were clearly beyond the pale of the redeeming love of Jesus.

But do you know how working with our hands frees up our heads and hearts? Auto bodywork does that for me. For Cecile it's gardening. For Gladys, it was chopping, baking, and browning. Such a reverie becomes trancelike. Surprising thoughts shoot through our head like starlings darting across telephone wires. While whirling from table to stove to cutting board in her farm kitchen, Gladys paused dumbstruck over an epiphany. She said it aloud to no one in particular. "I...I can't say anymore that Catholics can't be saved." She froze with fear and exhilaration in that moment. She never knew I overheard in the next room.

Here's what Gladys taught me in that moment. Christian faith isn't a monolithic towering truth reducible to immutable principles or little rules. Faith is a way of seeing and knowing God's world, based upon our relationship with God in Christ, and with others. Faith is a living and breathing thing, ever changing, as more light is given us, singly and together.

Any religion less than that is, frankly, what got Jesus crucified, as he colored outside the lines of Jewish spirituality. We heard about that last week in the story of Simon's dinner party and a shady lady washing Jesus' feet. Grandma taught me that the Christian faith is an ongoing conversation among a host of voices. Family voices. Church voices. Neighbor voices. And voices that suddenly, inexplicably rise within us. That is what the Bible is: the timeless chorus of God's people talking with one another about what God is up to. As I hear our many voices here at FCC discussing, weighing and affirming in worship, in our classes, at Council meetings--it reminds me of the Bible. Out of the ongoing conversations with living voices--past and present--we learn to see by God's revealing light. Obedient faith is about living up to the gift of such grace-filled relationships, not keeping rules.

It happened invisibly, but I saw the Holy Spirit touch Gladys Rosenberger in that moment. We in the UCC need a higher doctrine of the Holy Spirit. By that I mean we need to allow more room for what happened in that Michigan farm kitchen. If we do, it will help illumine the way. Of course, this is why the UCC declares, God Is Still Speaking. This is what Rev.

John Robinson meant in his farewell to English pilgrims before they founded Plimouth Plantation: “the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”

Such considerations are essential if we’re to make Christian sense and act in a lovingly Christ-like manner around the question of what blessing the church brings to same-sex couples. Is it a full blessing? Is it a partial blessing? Or is it our traditional non-blessing?

Twenty years ago I felt very differently about this than I do now. May I share with you the struggle of my journey? While I have cut my ministerial teeth in our mainline UCC church, I was raised in a more evangelical church. Our sense of Bible was acute, deep, and probing. So even if I could dismiss texts like Lev. (18:22, 20:13) as being “of the Old Testament”, what Paul writes to the Romans (1.18-23) clearly condemns homosexual behavior. So it was an open and shut case so far as I was concerned. Or maybe not so fast. Maybe the Holy Spirit swoops anew among us today in a way none of us could have anticipated. It has happened before, long before Gladys, in the book of Acts. Let’s go inside our text.

Scene one: Cornelius is a Roman army officer and also a God-fearer. His piety is evident from his practices of giving alms to the poor and constant prayer. Despite that he is unclean on two counts, as leader of the Roman violent oppression and as a Gentile (whom the Jews called “dogs”), his godly devotion to Jesus Christ is evident and blameless. Cornelius wants full a blessing within a believing community of faithful people like himself.

Scene two: Cornelius has a vision. Angels send him to the apostle Peter in Joppa, staying with Simon the Tanner. Notice something here, how Cornelius and Peter *are directed at every turn in the story by a power greater than themselves*. Peter is praying on a roof of a home. He has his own vision. In Peter’s dream, a sheet is lowered from heaven containing all animals. Peter is three times commanded to eat. He balks because of his kosher diet. More than mere etiquette, the Jewish dietary laws demarcate his faith in the face of constant pressure to forsake it: a little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there, pretty soon being Jewish means nothing. This isn’t a story about broadminded tolerance. It is a story of an emerging spiritual identity, and growing in faith as God does a new thing.

So Cornelius, bid by an angel, goes to meet the apostle. Peter receives this Gentile-dog only because of his food dream where God said not to dismiss as unclean what is clean. How about that? The Holy Spirit, the invisible main character of Acts, is breaking down old divisions. A self-respecting Jew welcomes a Gentile-dog to his table. Unheard of! Or maybe not. Remember how Jesus was criticized for the company he kept at dinner table?

Scene three: as a crowd forms in Joppa, Peter feels a sermon coming on. What can I say? He’s a preacher! We are always feeling sermons emerging within us. How to include the Gentiles was the hottest crisis in the first 100 years of the church. It caused deep division and debate. Today we see it as a slam-dunk. We miss the painful controversy. Peter played the law-touting conservative over against Paul the liberal, bringing in Gentile-dogs from the provinces. So it was shocking for Peter to say: “*I now know that God shows*

no partiality.” God has no preference in face color and has no favorite race. God shows no partiality. *None!* Can we hear what an upsetting, radical word that was for those used to neatly dividing the world between the blessed and unblessed? Of course, as we make those divisions, it’s interesting how we always count ourselves among the blessed. It was scandalous for an observant Jew to declare and for others to hear. Guess what? After trying to constrict new wine in old wineskins, the full blast of the gospel gets unleashed.

Certainly, deep reluctance was felt, like Gladys welcoming her Catholic son-in-law. In both cases, however, the reconciling and transforming gospel won the day. So Peter’s dream was not only about unclean food but also about granting a full blessing to unclean people. His dream was about our inability to decide what and who are the clean and the unclean.

Scene four: any doubt about Peter’s insight into God’s impartiality is swept away as the Holy Spirit descends upon Cornelius and his kin. “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have just received the Holy Spirit?” (10.47) No, this is surely of God. Guess what? That’s not a non-blessing or a partial blessing. That’s a full blessing, friends. That’s the wide arms of Jesus Christ that you always see me spreading out here at FCC.

In a word, I believe the Holy Spirit is present, moving, and at work among us today in a way beckoning us to welcome with a full blessing those before made to feel unclean. By this I mean lesbians and homosexuals identifying with the Christian covenant of faith and seeking to live out with us Christian vows of marriage as a sacred and holy promise. I believe, “God shows no partiality” is expanding its boundaries in our own day. The subject isn’t easy. But the occasion, like Peter visiting Cornelius, is joyous. For me today Acts supersedes Romans much as pro-slavery texts, inferiority of women texts, and mandates to circumcise grown men to finish their conversion texts have been superseded. I needed time to get to this place. But this movement of the Spirit today is clear to me and others.

The First Congregational Church, Darien has already come most of the way in this journey by approving the blessing of same-sex civil unions back in 2006. But the world moved ahead of the church in 2015 by striking down statues of any state forbidding same-sex marriage as unconstitutional. So we need to update what manner of blessing FCC offers.

Like Cornelius and Peter, I hold that in our own time we are being directed through our stories toward an opportunity by a force, a Spirit, greater than ourselves to break down painful, old divisions. To use Acts 10 as our template, here’s the real question. Just as Acts asks, who would forbid water for baptizing Cornelius and his family, despite being Gentile outsiders; I ask, who would stop me from blessing two men or two women forging a holy covenant together before God to love the other as Christ loves the church?

In this, like my grandma before me, I am surprised by the vigorous and surprising work of the Holy Spirit. As we test the Spirit’s presence and as we test any ethic, it is good to project a stance over time. In 20 years, in 40 years, how will it look? Will this shift have contributed to the watering down of morality, to the eroding of the family, or the decline

of western civilization? I believe the opposite. For those worried about preserving faithfulness, this movement is a new call to fidelity, a mark of the Spirit. In 20 years, I see us saying, like Gladys embracing Bob, how could we do otherwise? What took us so long?

This isn't about inclusiveness or broadminded tolerance; more profoundly, it is Christian identity and sacred vows. This isn't to explain away Bible verses that vex us; it's about a new balance among the voices of God's people--biblical and contemporary. What do we call it? Maybe we are a Full Blessing Church, maybe a Wide-Arms-of-Jesus Church.

Thanks for listening to me. I want to hear you at our 11th Hour in the Morehouse Room. Amen.